

Familiar by jonaskahnwald

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Summary:

In a split-second decision that neither Noah nor the Stranger expected, Jonas decides to sacrifice his own existence to save Mikkel. Of course, time travel never goes as planned and instead of non-existence, Jonas ends up further from 2019's Winden than he ever could've imagined.

1. I. Zenosyne

Author's Note:

I got a prompt about putting Jonas/Steve together and I decided why not.

I don't speak German but Jonas does, so when it's from his POV all English will be in italics.

Conversely, German in Steve's POV will be in italics.

Zenosyne

(n. the sense that time is always getting faster. As a kid you run around so fast, the world around you seems to stand still. A summer vacation can stretch on for an eternity. With each birthday we circle back and cross the same point around the sun. We wish each other 'many happy returns.' But soon you feel the circle begin to tighten, and you realize it's a spiral, and you're already halfway through...)

« Winden, 1986, Jonas »

Jonas gripped the back of Mikkell's jacket tightly as the two of them stumbled through the forest, determined not to lose his friend's brother - and his own father - again. Mikkell had asked a few questions in the beginning but now he was silent as he worked to keep up with Jonas's long strides. He clearly knew where they were headed at this point, yet he elected to keep quiet and Jonas could feel the boy's eyes burning into the back of his head.

"I'm bringing you home," Jonas murmured lowly in front of him, not looking back to see how Mikkell reacted. He was proud his voice didn't shake to betray his fear at the fact that soon he wouldn't exist anymore. The decision had seemed incomprehensible and he'd sensed that the stranger who'd told him about the consequences hadn't quite expected him to make it so soon. But it ate away at him, knowing that he had the power to stop all of this. Maybe saving Mikkell could even somehow stop the other deaths and disappearances if it changed things enough.

"How'd you get here?" Mikkel asked for the third time that night, refusing to acknowledge Jonas's statement. It was as if he could sense the older teen's indecisiveness about what he was about to do. Jonas finally paused outside of the cave, swallowing back a knot of fear in his throat.

"The cave has a door. You can go back that way."

"You? What do you mean 'you'? It should be we. Are you planning to stay?"

Jonas internally cursed his slip-up as he released Mikkel's jacket and turned to really look at the boy for the first time since dragging him out of the hospital that night. It was impossible not to notice now; the shrewd intelligence already showing itself in Mikkel's eyes, the stubborn set of his jaw, the quiet reluctance to go through with something he didn't fully understand... If left to develop, there was no doubt in Jonas's mind that this kid in front of him would someday turn into his father. He had no idea how to feel about that - it defied the very laws of nature and trying to think for too long about it made his head ache.

"I'll come a little later, okay?" Jonas dropped his eyes again, wondering if Mikkel would remember any of this once he went back. Probably not; no one would remember him because he wouldn't exist anymore. His mother, his friends, Martha... Cold like a sluice of water ran down his neck as he tucked his hands into his pockets and rocked on his heels, choking on the fear again. At least that would be gone, that constant fear that nipped at his heels wherever he went.

"You should come now," Mikkel muttered doubtfully, eyeing Jonas like he no longer trusted him. It was Jonas's turn to fall silent and walk ahead, carefully picking his way over the rocks at the entrance of the cave and activating the strange light he'd received. He kept an ear out for Mikkel behind him as he trailed a hand along the wall to keep his bearings, heading straight for the familiar door.

"You came back for me," Mikkel called from behind him as Jonas reached the door. "I don't want to go back without you. You're the only one who doesn't hit me in the back of the head."

Jonas stopped outside the door and allowed himself a moment of pain facing away from Mikkel. It was better, wasn't it? This way his father wouldn't die and his presence wouldn't mess up the entire town.

"Jonas?" Mikkel's voice was soft as he grabbed Jonas's sleeve, forcing Jonas to turn to him. Mikkel's expression was indecipherable as he cocked his head slightly and studied Jonas's face. "What will happen if I go back?"

Jonas hid his pain the best he could as he crouched slightly, setting both hands on Mikkel's shoulders. It gave him the oddest feeling because he could remember his father doing this to him sometimes when he was younger. Holding his shoulders and promising him things that weren't true. *I'll look after you, Jonas. I'll always be here for you.*

"Nothing bad. I promise I'll come later," Jonas murmured hoarsely, swallowing against tears. "Trust me. It's better if you go first."

"Okay. Just remember that you promised," Mikkel whispered, brows furrowing in confusion as they stood face-to-face studying each other. Before Jonas could let go, Mikkel tugged him forward to wrap both arms around him in a tight hug that hid both of their expressions from each other. "Thank you. Maybe when you come back you'll marry Martha and we can all be family. That'd be cool."

"Yeah," Jonas managed to say, nodding into Mikkel's shoulder. "When I come back, we'll be family. Sounds good." And then, in a voice he himself could barely hear, "Bye, Dad."

He released Mikkel and quickly stepped away, rubbing a fast sleeve across his nose as he distracted himself with stepping forward to grab the cold handle of the door. It creaked open slowly to reveal absolute darkness, and before he could rethink he handed his light to Mikkel.

"I'll get a light on my way back." He put a hand on Mikkel's back and guided the unwilling boy to the door, keeping up the pressure until Mikkel was firmly on the other side of the door. He drew in a long, deep breath and wondered how he could've taken so much for granted every day. Just the feeling of oxygen expanding his lungs... It

wasn't something a nonexistent being would ever be aware of.

"Live well," were Jonas's final words as he eased the door shut in Mikkell's pale face.

"No, wai -"

The door shut before Mikkell could finish his protest and Jonas leaned against it as he heard Mikkell feebly protest more and bang on the door a bit. But Mikkell was still a kid and no kid wanted to stay in a dark, tomb-like hallway forever. Before long, the bangs ceased and the sound of fading footsteps were all that could be heard. Jonas's hands fisted in his hair as he sank down with his back against the door, feeling more alone than he ever had.

He drew in deep, shuddering breaths and closed his eyes before they could adjust to the dark, concentrating on everything he was feeling so he could appreciate his last few seconds of existence. The uncomfortable press of a rock at his heel, the throb of a lip busted by his best friend, the choking panicky feeling his meds were supposed to suppress, the sound of the cave's natural creaks and sighs. He wasn't sure if he'd lived well enough, but at least he'd lived. Even if no one would remember it in the end.

Resisting the urge to speak to hear his own voice, he slumped over so he was half-laying, and felt the oddest sensation begin to come over him. It was like a pulling, but not something physical, exactly. More like something inside of him he'd never felt before being separated from physical sensation. Feeling was abating and with it, the panic. His last conscious feeling was a sense of deep rest, and then nothing.

《 ???, ???, Jonas 》

The first thing Jonas became aware of was Dark. It was all around him, stretching for infinity with no end or beginning. He still felt that eerie calm from before so he stayed there for an indeterminate amount of time, fading in and out of wisps of thought. Until Light. It bloomed out in a tiny bud around him, and he gradually became aware of himself. He was laying slumped over with his eyes half open

in the strangest place.

Blinking owlishly, he moved his body and found that whatever had happened before had been reversed. He could feel his entire self again, and all of a sudden everything came back in a rush that made him gag and bring up what little he had in his stomach. Squinting through tears that had come from the bitter taste, he forced himself to stand up.

There was Nothing around him. In all directions it was dark, except for a small pool of light around him that showed him what he was standing on. Which, impossibly, looked like water. He bent over to touch it; it was like touching glass, cool and immobile under his fingers. Straightening, the panic came back in a rush and made him start to shake. What if this was his new forever? What if he would just be... here? In this Nothing?

"Hello?" he gritted out through a raspy throat, spinning around as his eyes roved aimlessly. "Hello!" His voice rose and cracked as he started walking, then running. It didn't seem to be getting him anywhere, but the motion and sound made him feel better so he kept running and yelling to keep the panic at bay. He didn't expect anything to happen from what he was doing, but all of a sudden he caught the tiniest glimpse of another light in the distance. Eyes wide, he made for it as quick as he could.

"Hello!" he shouted as loud as his throat would allow, and the light wobbled until he was close enough to see that it belonged to a girl. Dark curls bounced in every direction on her head as she turned to gape at him, eyes going wide as she looked him up and down.

"Who are you? Where did you come from?"

Jonas furrowed his brow in concentration, recognizing the language but knowing only simple words. He could tell the gist of it was questioning but she wasn't asking the most important question.

"When," he said in English, willing her to understand because he didn't know enough to have a full conversation. "When?"

"When?" she repeated, studying him. Her eyes took on a light of

understanding and she nodded as if to say she got what he meant.
"Nine...teen. Eight... eighty-six."

She held up the numbers on her fingers so he could understand. 1986... so he was still when Mikkel had disappeared? How had that happened? Mikkel should've gone over and he should've stopped existing.

"Where?" he asked next as the girl took a step closer, walking a circle around him and squinting at his clothes. He allowed her, following her with his head as he waited.

"Upside Down."

He wasn't sure what she'd just said or if he could even translate it, so he spread his hands in helpless frustration. At least there was someone here with him, even if she couldn't speak his language.

"Gone on a trip," she said carefully, and he was pretty sure she meant that she wasn't anywhere near him, which made no sense. *"You made a hole. I'll come back to fix it, but you need help. Look."*

Jonas understood help and look, so he followed her finger to see she was pointing at another person who'd appeared in a pool of light but who he somehow sensed couldn't see them. Some guy with odd hair who was muttering English to himself as he flipped through a book.

"How do I get to him?" Jonas switched back to German but the girl still appeared to get what he meant, or at least the essence of it.

"Go through the hole. Back to the real world."

"Through what?"

The girl reached out and tentatively took his sleeve where Mikkel had held it what felt like only moments before, then led him through the darkness. Apparently it did have an end; they came to a hole he could glimpse the stars from and the scent of fresh air made his heart ache. What if he'd managed to save himself *and* Mikkel? He might have to live in 1986 and grow up to meet his friends again, but what if he was still allowed to exist? He stepped forward eagerly to go out through the hole and was stopped by a tug on his sleeve.

“Something is wrong about you. I don’t understand. You don’t feel like a person. Not a monster, but not a person. How did you get here?”

Jonas had no idea what she’d said so he simply shrugged, too excited by the prospect of getting back into the world to mull over why she’d used the English word for wrong.

“Don’t go near gates to the Upside Down,” the girl warned, and Jonas still didn’t understand but he nodded because he recognized whatever she’d said as a command. *“Find Steve.”*

“Steve,” Jonas agreed, and was finally released.

《 Hawkins, 1986, Jonas 》

Outside the gates of the Hawkins National Laboratory, a teen in a yellow coat fell to the soft ground and let out a small sob of relief as he dug his fingers into the grass and pressed his forehead into the dirt. He stayed there for so long the sun bleached the night into day again. Then he stood up, stared in dazed confusion at a sign written in English, and, after an indeterminate amount of time, turned away from the lab and began to walk.

2. II. Keyframe

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm changing the Stranger Things timeline a bit so 1986 takes place one year after the end of season two rather than two years (call it a mostly canon compliant AU or something).

Also, updates probably won't always be this fast since the semester will start picking up soon but I'll do my best! Thanks for reading!

Keyframe

(n. a moment that seemed innocuous at the time but ended up marking a diversion into a strange new era of your life)

« Hawkins, 1986, Steve »

The book made no sense. No matter how Steve read it, the words seemed to blur together into a mess and he knew he'd never be able to learn 'The Fundamentals of Carpentry' with his heart not in it. He shut it in disgust and tossed it across the room, getting up with a noisy sigh to pace around as he considered his future. He didn't want to work for his dad forever but it was looking like that was the way it was going to go. At least he'd have the kids around to alleviate any boredom, though right now Hopper had taken them all off on a camping trip since Eleven hadn't been able to go on their final school trip last year. Steve was really regretting not joining them now.

Pinching the bridge of his nose and allowing himself a moment more of self-pity, he finally shook his head and decided that moping around in his room really wasn't going to get anything done. What he'd do was take a college bird course and hope his grades somehow magically went up, even if Nancy was no longer helping. But it was November so it was too late to get into anything this year, and that was what he *would* do. What he was *doing* on the other hand...

“Hey, Ally.” Steve leaned against the counter, twisting the phone cord in one hand and tapping his fingers with the other as he made sure his parents’ cars weren’t home. “I’m thinking of having a party. Just a small get-together. Do you want to bring some friends?”

About five more calls like that and Steve was pretty sure half the old senior year was coming to his place tonight. A huge party was the perfect chance to take his mind off of what he’d do next year, plus it would help keep him distracted until the kids got back. Like it or not, he really missed the little shits and was especially eager to get his sidekick back so him and Dustin could patrol for more Demagorgons. Not like there’d be any around since Eleven had made sure to close every hole into the Upside Down, but you could never be too sure.

The rest of the day was spent prepping his house for the party, setting up music and hiding his mom’s best china so it wouldn’t get broken. His parents were away so often on business that he was sure he’d be able to have everything cleaned up before they got back, but the one thing he couldn’t do was put broken things back together exactly the way they had been. That done, he spent another hour styling his hair, then tossed a couple of beers on the counter so people would see the pile and add more. It would be perfect.

The first guest showed up at around seven and Steve was pretty sure people didn’t stop arriving for the rest of the night. By eight he was tipsy enough that he wasn’t even hurt when Jonathan and Nancy didn’t show up too.

“Great party, Harrington,” a girl giggled at his arm, tipping her glass in his direction.

“Thanks.” It was offhanded and distracted, but this time around it wasn’t to get her to like him. Nancy had done a number on his heart he wasn’t sure he’d ever recover from, and he had no desire to get back into the game. Instead he drifted away from the girl until he found some relatively harmless nerds who kind of reminded him of the kids.

“I’m gonna teach you pool. Like *real* pool,” he was laughing when a commotion at the door made him pause in his bubbly rambling. The first thing he saw was that somehow Nancy had managed to make it

to the party and into the house without him noticing - and she was with Jonathan, who looked completely out of his element.

“Dude, isn’t that your ex?” one of the nerds whispered in awe, and Steve offered a half-hearted shrug as Nancy spotted him and waved. He was about to make his way over to her and Jonathan when someone he was pretty sure was from the football team grabbed his arm.

“Harrington!” the guy yelled to be heard over the blaring music. “There’s some guy looking for you!”

“Uh-huh.” Steve was nodding but straining to get away so he could see how Nancy was doing; naturally, people would be looking for him at his own party. With his luck it was probably Hargrove looking to fuck him up.

“I think he’s drunk!” Football Guy continued, forcing Steve to turn. “No one can understand a word he’s saying except for your name! By the way, was it supposed to rain tonight?”

That distracted him away from Nancy long enough to shake his head in confusion at how separate the subjects seemed, even for a drunk guy. A second later, he found out why; the girl who’d been flirting with him earlier was leading some guy dressed in a yellow rain coat towards him.

“This Steve?” he heard her ask, but Rain Coat didn’t bother answering. He was suddenly moving away from the girl at a much quicker speed, heading for Steve with an urgency that would’ve been terrifying had Steve not dealt with insane things before.

“Uh... Can I help you?” Steve asked as Rain Coat stopped in front of him, eyes flicking over him like he was sizing Steve up. He was way too small to be picking fights; he had to be at least four inches shorter and he wasn’t exactly brawny. Still, Steve knew to be prepared for everything so he handed his drink to some random party-goer just in case it came to that.

“Steve,” Rain Coat stated gravely, a weird inflection on the name that Steve hadn’t heard before.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

“Jonas.” Rain Coat - or Jonas, Steve guessed - gestured to himself before stepping even closer. It was a serious invasion of personal space but something in Jonas’s eyes made Steve reluctant to shove the shorter teen away. For some reason those eyes reminded him of Will Byers’s; they were haunted like he’d seen way too much for one lifetime and lived through things that should’ve killed a lesser person.

“*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.” Steve shrugged, though something about this stranger was making him nervous. What if... what if this guy was a Russian or German spy who’d heard about the Upside Down? Did kids his age get turned into spies?

“*Ich spreche kein Englisch,*” Jonas said, clearly frustrated with how the exchange was going. “*Ähm...* when. Me. Future.”

“I’m really bad at word association,” Steve cringed as Jonas tried to mime out something that he couldn’t understand at all. He kept holding up numbers on his fingers and repeating future. Two... no fingers... one... nine. It took a couple of tries before Steve got it.

“You’re saying you’re from the future? Twenty-nineteen?”

“Twenty-nineteen,” Jonas agreed, nodding vigorously. He said a long stream of something else in his own language that Steve understood absolutely nothing of, then sort of sagged towards the carpet.

“Hey, clear the room!” Steve called as Jonas swayed a little on the floor. Wherever he was from, he’d clearly been doing a lot of walking; now that Steve got a better look, the guy’s legs were shaking and he appeared to be trying to hold back a grimace of pain. It took a ton of ushering on his part to herd everyone out of the living room, and when he finally did he was only slightly surprised to find Nancy and Jonathan still there.

“What’s going on?” Nancy asked before Steve could say anything, her eyes wide and empathetic as she took in Jonas shivering on the floor.

“I have no idea. This guy came in asking for me, but he doesn’t speak

much English.” It was easier to talk to Nance during a crisis, and Steve focused as much of his attention as he could on Jonas. “He said something about coming from the future which... I mean, we’ve seen some crazy stuff, but I don’t know how to feel about that. Maybe he’s on drugs?”

Nancy pursed her lips thoughtfully and cautiously made her way over to Jonas while Jonathan and Steve watched. She crouched down and began speaking in a low voice, one that made Jonas’s head jerk up.

“What language was it that he speaks?” Jonathan asked quietly as Jonas’s shoulders lost their defeated look.

“No idea. Why?”

“Nancy’s taking German so I think she knows enough to have a basic conversation. I wonder if...”

Jonathan’s wondering was brought to an abrupt halt as Nancy stood, beckoning him and Steve over. Steve couldn’t quite decipher the look on her face, but he was pretty sure Jonas’s was panic as he desperately searched the three people standing above him.

“His name is Jonas and he’s from a small German town called Winden,” Nancy informed them, folding her arms across her chest. “He said he came from 2019. And that he was told to find Steve by a young curly-haired girl.”

“Wait, Eleven sent him?” Steve’s voice rose a bit and he cast a quick glance towards the doorway where party-goers were dancing before lowering it. “Why? Who is he and what is he doing in Hawkins? How is he from the future?”

Nancy relayed Steve’s questions in slow, halting German while Jonas listened intently before turning back to Steve.

“*Ich weiß es nicht,*” Jonas said tiredly, moving to get up and nearly falling again. Steve rapidly moved forward to catch him, supporting his weight as he helped the teen to the couch. It was only after he made sure that Jonas wouldn’t fall off the couch and conk his head on the floor that he straightened up to quirk a questioning brow at

Nancy.

"He doesn't... know."

More exhausted, mumbled German that made Nancy cock her head with her brow furrowed like it was a puzzle she was trying to decode.

"From what I gather, I think El said you would help him. I don't get some of his words; he's talking about a door and going back home."

"Ask him if he came from the Upside Down," Jonathan prompted, bouncing nervously on his feet. Nancy relayed the question but Jonas shrugged, shaking his head in confusion.

"Hey, you two..." Steve began, but it seemed like Jonathan and Nancy were in a world of their own.

"Do you think I should take a picture of him?" Jonathan was asking, touching the camera at his neck. "You know, circulate it in case someone's looking for him."

"I don't know. What if he's in trouble from someone? What if he escaped from a facility like El?"

"You think he's another one of the kids? Number five or something?"

"We could talk to Murray and see if he knows anything about German experiments, too. I mean, Murray once said the Nazis did experiments so he could even be -"

"Nance! Jonathan!" Steve interrupted loudly, catching Jonas for a second time when the teen's eyelids fluttered and he nearly fell off the couch. Steve looped one of Jonas's arms around his shoulder and gave Jonathan a stern look until the photographer quickly came and joined him, taking Jonas's other arm. "No offense, but maybe we should hold off on everything until he's had a chance to sleep off whatever's wrong with him. He could make more sense in the morning."

"No, you're absolutely right," Nancy sighed as she watched Jonas's head loll and jerk back up as he tried to keep himself awake. "But are you sure about letting him stay here? He seems harmless enough, but

he could be dangerous."

"He's like five foot nothing and I own a bat that can - and has - killed a Demagorgon. I think it'll be fine." Not to mention how light Jonas was; Steve was pretty sure he could actually handle getting Jonas upstairs on his own but it was better to be safe than sorry. "I'll give him my room and I'll take my parent's. Nance, would you mind getting rid of everyone?"

Nancy nodded and disappeared into the other room to shut off the music as Jonathan helped Steve maneuver Jonas up the stairs.

"How... how've you two been?" Steve asked conversationally, pretending to be immersed in helping Jonas.

"Uh, good," Jonathan replied awkwardly, bobbing his head and avoiding eye contact. "Great, actually. We're great. She's great, which I'm sure you - Well, it's good. How about you? Do you have anyone?"

"Nope. Not even in the market. Gotta focus on school and stuff, you know?" Steve kept his voice light and cheery as they crested the stairs, slowly turning Jonas down the hall. "Plus end of the world stuff. If Eleven sent this guy, there's definitely some insane shitstorm to follow."

"Yeah, of course."

Silence stretched long and awkward between them, broken only by Jonas's breaths growing more labored. This time Steve wasn't trying to look worried when he glanced down at the blond, who was taking everything in with wide, nervous eyes. Despite himself, Steve genuinely wanted to help this German guy, if only because he knew what it was like to be thrown head first into a situation where you knew virtually nothing. And it'd be a lie to say that he hadn't developed a protectiveness for certain kinds of people after spending time with Will and Eleven.

"I got it from here," Steve offered, giving Jonathan an excuse to flee back downstairs as he helped Jonas to his bed. He got Jonas to sit down and crossed his arms, considering whether or not it would be worth the trouble to look for new clothes. He was pretty sure the

older clothes might be a comfort at this point, though, so he decided he'd done as much as he could tonight.

"I know you don't speak English, but do you need anything like..." He mimed drinking a glass of water and eating while Jonas eyed him blearily, slowly shaking his head. "Right. Just sleep. Okay, let me know if you need anything."

He turned to leave the room, figuring Jonas would be able to guess at least that he was allowed to stay for the night. He was at the door when a quiet voice made him pause and turn to give Jonas one last look.

"Thanks, Steve." There was still a heavy accent on it, but the words were recognizable enough that Steve gave his most reassuring grin and tipped a two finger salute.

"No problem, man. Get some rest and we'll... Nance will help us talk tomorrow to figure this out. Goodnight."

"Mm."

He was pretty sure Jonas was asleep before his head even hit the pillow, and Steve eased the door shut with the tiniest click before leaving to head back downstairs. They'd figure out Jonas's story tomorrow. Hopefully it wouldn't be some end of the world thing, though Steve had a bad feeling that the end of the world was probably exactly what it was.

3. III. Flashover

Flashover

(n. the moment a conversation becomes real and alive, which occurs when a spark of trust shorts out the delicate circuits you keep insulated under layers of irony, momentarily grounding the static emotional charge you've built up through decades of friction with the world)

« Hawkins, 1986, Jonas »

If Jonas hadn't had experience with keeping quiet during nightmares, he would've woken up screaming. As it was, he already bolted up with his breath caught in his throat and sweat plastering his shirt to his chest. Before he was fully conscious he was fumbling for his meds, hand groping blindly for a surface that wasn't there. It took a moment too long for him to realize that this wasn't his bed, his house, or even his timeline.

"Oh good, you're up."

Jonas scrubbed at the corners of his eyes and squinted at the doorway where a silhouette stood in soft light filtering in from the hallway. A second later light blasted through the room and Jonas's skull as Steve flicked the light switch and came in holding a plate.

"You slept for nearly fifteen hours, you know that? It's almost eleven and Nance has already been by. She knows this guy her and Jonathan are going to try to find. Murray or something, I dunno, she told me he probably speaks... Aaaaand, you don't speak a ton of English. Right. I don't know why I'm trying to explain this to you."

Jonas eyed the other teen warily as he forced himself into a sitting position, recalling the shitshow of a time he'd had the day before. He had no idea how long he'd walked through the forest until he got to a dirt path to follow, but since he hadn't expected to exist for this long - and hadn't taken his meds, which meant slight withdrawal - it had felt like eternity. The first person he'd come upon had looked at him

like he was crazy, and apparently not a single person in this town knew how to speak his language. Except for the girl Steve had mentioned, Nancy, who was kind of hard to understand but who was still a blessing.

"I made eggs and bacon. Do you eat that where you're from? Not Germany, I mean - if that's where you're from - but like... the future. If you're from the future. Uh... wow, this is going great. Eat. Food. Are you hungry?"

"Eat," Jonas repeated, the word feeling clumsy in his mouth as he cautiously accepted the plate from Steve, who was watching him curiously. He sat for a second with the plate on his lap, staring back awkwardly and wishing he paid more attention during English classes. He understood a few of the words and knew the food was for him; it was just weird to be watched so intently. Not to mention he didn't know Steve from a hole in the ground and the guy had been oddly accepting of his statement about coming from the future. He wondered if he'd been put in a completely different world.

Dragging in a small breath, Jonas picked up a piece of bacon and took a polite bite before realizing just how famished he was. He'd spent the entire day walking and asking after Steve until someone around his age had thought he wanted to be taken to a party. He'd had to sit quietly sandwiched between two girls loudly singing music he faintly recognized as stuff his father had liked until they finally showed up at the house, and between arriving in the forest and now he hadn't had anything to eat.

"It's good," he got out around a mouthful of bacon, nodding to show his appreciation as he dug into the eggs without a fork. Steve quickly yelped something about *utensils* and left, leaving Jonas to take a good look at his surroundings. Clearly a guy's room, with posters of bands from the past and the noticeable scent of hairspray everywhere. Which meant Steve had leant Jonas his room, apparently.

Jonas finished his food quickly and threw off the covers, cringing at the fact that he hadn't even removed his shoes before getting into bed. Kicking them off now, he got up to pace around the room.

He was still in 1986. Not only was he 33 years away from home, but

he was also somehow thousands of miles away too. If he'd felt like this was too much before, now he felt like he'd been dumped into the middle of the ocean and was being overwhelmed with waves that threatened to drag him under. For months he'd kept expecting to wake up to find his father standing over him, offering to teach him a new magic trick. Now he'd be happy to just wake up in 2019.

"This is bullshit," he whispered, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to calm himself. Logically, he knew some of the frustration and hopelessness was coming from being off his meds, but logic didn't inform emotions.

To keep himself doing something, he started poking around the room to see what he could learn. Most of it was a mess of clothes and various tapes, but in the closet he got a shock. A bat studded with nails was meticulously placed on a pile of clothes, looking completely out of place. He reached out to heft it, surprised to find it was real; it looked like something out of a cheesy video game. Who the fuck was Steve?

"*Hey, yeah, just start searching my room, that's cool,*" a voice at the door stated, making him jump badly and turn with the bat half raised. Steve was clutching a fork protectively like it would help him against the bat that Jonas was now pointing at him.

"Who are you?" Jonas asked neutrally, fists tightening momentarily even though he knew he wasn't getting an answer. Or at least, one he could understand.

"*You could hit me. Or! Or, listen, we could trade and I could show you where the shower is. You know, shower? Like...*" Steve mimed what was probably supposed to be water raining down on his head, though if Jonas didn't know what the word *shower* meant, he'd probably have no idea what Steve was doing. Easing his grip, he lowered the bat and offered it to Steve.

"We need a translator," Jonas murmured, shaking his head.

"*God, I wish we had someone to translate,*" Steve sighed as he took the bat and quickly walked it back to the closet, making sure not to turn his back on Jonas. There was a long, wary pause before Steve

beckoned Jonas into the hall, rambling on and waving his hands like he was giving a tour. Jonas followed, watching Steve with new eyes after finding the bat. He didn't *look* like a fighter but looks could be deceiving. Maybe he was in an American gang. Or he'd been a child soldier. Who knew what Americans were like in the eighties?

When they finally got to the bathroom and Steve had talked enough to explain the theory of relativity, there was another pause during which Jonas thought he'd have to undress in front of Steve, which would be awkward as hell. But then Steve spoke in halting, terrible German, cringing like he knew how bad it was.

"Clothes... You can - uh, borrow. Mine. *Look, Nancy gave me her textbook and I've been looking up small things, but I don't know if I'm saying any of this right. Does this -makes sense, does?*"

"Yeah, it makes enough sense." Obviously Steve didn't understand that so Jonas nodded slowly and exaggeratedly until Steve breathed a sigh of relief. Jonas wasn't exactly the best judge of people, but for some reason seeing how hard Steve was trying for simple communication made him want to trust the guy. That, and he was pretty much at Steve's mercy because he was shit at fighting and had nowhere else to go. "Thanks."

"I know that one! It means thank you! Okay, awesome, we'll get the hang of this. Take a shower and borrow my clothes, and by that time hopefully Jonathan and Nancy will have found Murray. I'll be downstairs. Down...stairs."

"Yeah, got it."

Steve's grin was like he'd just won the lottery and Jonas couldn't help but smile a little after he was gone. They'd made hardly any progress at all, yet Steve had looked so proud of himself that it was kind of funny. For once, Jonas might've gotten lucky in meeting some whacky-haired guy from the eighties.

For the next half an hour, Jonas stood under a steady stream of heat and let it work on relaxing his muscles as he scrubbed blood and dirt from what felt like everywhere. His feet weren't used to taking so much abuse and his old socks were pretty much ruined with blood,

which meant he had to throw them in the garbage with a vicious, frustrated flip of the wrist.

It took him nearly twenty minutes to realize that his anger wasn't directed at just the socks.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he rasped under his breath, tilting his head against the shower's ceramic wall as the water finally swirled clear down the drain rather than pink or brown. It wasn't just that he hadn't prepared for what came after saving Mikkel - it was that he'd resigned himself to his fate. Sure, he'd been scared, but he knew that his presence in the world was completely messed up. It wasn't... right. *He* wasn't right. He couldn't even *die* right.

Shutting the water off, he grabbed a towel, stepped into the steamy air, and froze at the sight of the mirror. It was too fogged up to make anything out clearly, but there was an indistinct dark shape standing behind him. For a long moment he thought it was the usual hallucination of his father. Until it started growing. It had begun as vaguely humanish, however nothing about it looked human now; it was growing so large that its shadow alone was turning the room dark.

With a hoarse cry, Jonas leapt forward and spun at the same time, throwing his hands up protectively as he slipped on the tiled floor to land dangerously close to the sink, but it didn't matter because what was in front of him was -

Nothing.

Where the figure had been was just empty space, the cheery, warm light of the bathroom dispelling any illusion that he might've mistaken a shadow for something more sinister.

"Jonas? *You okay?*" A frantic knocking on the door jolted him out of his shocked stupor and he brushed a nervous hand over his face before using the sink to pull himself up, trying to shake off the feeling that someone or something had been in there with him.

"I'm fine. Um, *I am okay.*"

"Alright, I thought I heard you yell. If you need anything..."

Jonas ran a quick hand through his hair, then stepped forward to open the door, making sure the towel was secure at his waist.

"Clothes?"

Steve was turned away like he was about to leave, but turned back at the sound of Jonas's voice.

"Yeah, they're right -"

Jonas waited, watching in confusion as Steve stopped mid-sentence to simply stare. It was almost comical, how Steve's brows went to his hairline and he suddenly didn't seem to know whether to cross his arms or set them on his waist, then didn't know whether to look away or keep staring.

"You, uh... you want something for your feet? I don't know how to say feet in German. Antibacterial? Alcohol? Ringing any bells?"

"Alcohol?" Jonas was even more confused now, and Steve settled with crossing his arms, turning away to leave.

"Just get dressed, man. It's weird talking to you half-naked."

Jonas still wasn't sure what that whole exchange was about but he went back to Steve's room nonetheless, finding clothes already laid out for him. The pants were alright rolled up, though the shirt and sweater were long enough that he felt dwarfed. To get over his feeling of discomfort he grabbed his rain coat to throw on before heading down the stairs, carefully avoiding empty beer cans and bits of food stuck to the wall.

"I forgot how messy these goddamn people are," Steve was muttering to himself, grabbing whatever trash was in reach to stuff it into a bag. It took Jonas only a moment's hesitation before he started back up the stairs, methodically picking up cans to help out the guy who was giving him a place to stay.

"Oh, c'mon, you don't have to do that." Steve made a half-hearted attempt to get Jonas to stop, but in the end they mostly had to kill

time so they worked in a comfortable silence, broken only by Steve's occasional attempts at German.

"Winden," he tried conversationally when they had both moved into the living room as the last place in the house to be cleaned. "Nice, is it?"

"Not really, not anymore," Jonas responded honestly, then realized that might be too advanced for Steve to understand. "It's okay."

"Okay, okay... *Okay, I think it means. That's good, I guess.* Do you many friends have there?"

"Some." Even without the language barrier, that would've been a difficult subject to approach. Bartosz had told him never to come back, Magnus probably wouldn't appreciate him breaking Martha's heart, and Martha... Just thinking about the uncomprehending hurt in her eyes made him want to hide away forever.

"*Wow, that was convincing. Come on, you must have something nice in your life. What about... parents?*"

The can in Jonas's hand slipped from his fingers and he fumbled to catch it, taking longer than usual as he tried to think of a coherent, simple response.

"Mama is nice." Except for the cold silences that fell like a heavy snow at the dinner table, or the fact that she sometimes seemed more interested in the man she was having an affair with than her son. Still, she was his mother and he loved her; she'd raised him and the days before had been happier. He still felt guilty about leaving her all alone despite the fact that she likely wouldn't remember him. But it was what it was.

"*I can't tell if my German is worse than I could've ever imagined or if your life just really sucks. How is German my, by the way?*"

Jonas tossed a can into the garbage bag Steve was holding and straightened up with the smallest smile.

"*You know Yoda?*" he asked in English, his smile growing when Steve's jaw dropped.

"Wh - seriously? That bad?" Steve spluttered, acting mock-offended. *"Strong with the force this one is. From the future he did come."*

The croaky voice was such a bad impression that Jonas couldn't help laughing, shaking his head as Steve lost the constipated expression he'd assumed to do the voice. He arched an eyebrow at Jonas, pretending not to be impressed, but after a second he joined in laughing. It felt... good. Really good, to be able to laugh after the week Jonas had been having. If he had to pick out the moment he'd realized he trusted Steve, it was then. Especially with the look Steve gave him when their laughs finally subsided, an amused, cocky expression that lightened Jonas's heart the tiniest bit.

"I knew I could do it. You haven't smiled since you got here and that's just not okay. In the house of Harrington, not smiling is against the law. You must laugh at least once per day."

"An order?" Jonas questioned as he scooped up the last can, tossing it between his hands.

"Absolutely."

It was going so well, him and Steve bonding over stupid shit. He finally didn't feel as down, they'd accomplished something in cleaning the house, and they were starting to be able to communicate better. All was good. Which is exactly why he should've expected it to blow up in his face.

"Murray, no!" a familiar voice cried as the front door slammed open down the hall, making Jonas and Steve turn in unison. Heavy footsteps traipsed down the hall as they watched, too curious to do anything other than stare when a bearded man in a house coat rounded the corner to step into the living room.

"Which one of you is the German?" the man demanded in Jonas's language, startling Jonas. The shock must've registered on his face because the man didn't even need an answer before he was marching up to Jonas, pulling his hand from where it had been tucked into his armpit. There was only a split second to catch the glimpse of something dark before a cold muzzle was pressed against Jonas's forehead, digging a circle into the space between his eyes.

"Buh-bye," the man said easily, a grim look of determination on his face. A moment later, he pulled the trigger.

4. IV. Xeno

Xeno

(n. the smallest measurable unit of human connection, typically exchanged between passing strangers—a flirtatious glance, a sympathetic nod, a shared laugh about some odd coincidence—moments that are fleeting and random but still contain powerful emotional nutrients that can alleviate the symptoms of feeling alone)

« Hawkins, 1986, Steve »

Steve knew he wouldn't be in time even before he started moving. As good as his reaction time was, it simply wasn't possible for him to move his entire body a few feet before the man he assumed was Murray twitched his finger a few centimetres. Naturally, it didn't stop him from trying, but he heard the click and knew it was all over as his body crashed into Jonas's and he more or less tackled the smaller teen onto the couch.

"Huh," was all Murray said behind him as he rolled off of Jonas to frantically begin checking for injuries while Jonas stared, wide-eyed and wild-haired.

"You're okay? You're fine?" Steve kept asking, reaching to tilt Jonas's chin up so he could study where the gun had been resting. There was a tiny imprint where the gun had been pressed but no brains splattered everywhere and no sign of blood. It was only after Jonas managed to grab his hands that he relaxed, realizing that no, Murray hadn't blown his new friend's brains all over his living room wall. And with the panic abating, the next thing that set in was anger.

He released Jonas to whirl on Murray, who had tucked the gun away somewhere and was nodding to himself as he watched both boys.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Steve demanded, stepping closer to shove the man. "What the *hell* is wrong with you? You think you can just walk into someone's living room and start - start waving guns

at their guests?! I don't even know why you have a gun, but you can leave the way you came and never - "

"Steve!" Nancy was suddenly in the room with Jonathan close behind her, tugging Steve back by the arm he'd been winding up to hit Murray with. He may not have been the biggest fan of confrontation, but once he took someone in he didn't let *anyone* threaten them. He was almost as angry as he would've been if Murray had waved a gun at the kids; Jonas had clearly been through some shit and he didn't deserve that kind of scare.

"It was a test," Jonathan broke in, quickly getting between Murray and Steve to hold both hands up placatingly. "One Nancy and I didn't agree to. We told him to leave the gun at home and we thought he had, but apparently - "

"Being a test doesn't excuse it!" Steve interrupted, fuming. "I don't want him in my house or near Jonas. What if it had been Will?"

"Okay, that's a little different - " Nancy began, but Steve didn't want to listen to that either. He hadn't wanted to bring another person in in the first place; he'd only agreed because Nancy had said Murray could help them figure out what was going on faster than she could. In his mind, if he messed up with Jonas he was messing up something Eleven was trusting him with, and god only knew it took forever to get her to trust someone.

"Eleven sent him to me. *Me*. Do you know why? It's because *I don't let people wave guns in the faces of the people I'm looking after!*"

"Steve." Nancy was firm as Jonathan turned to Murray and held out his hand for the gun. Steve would've watched the entire exchange carefully but Nancy forced him to look at her, grabbing his arms and turning him away so he could only see her. "You need to calm down."

"I-I-I-" There was a long pause during which Nancy raised both brows at him. Finally, he let out a long sigh and ran a hand through his hair, pulling away from her grip to pace the room. "Fine. I'm calm. But I want him out."

"No."

Everyone paused in what they were doing as the new voice entered the fray and Jonas straightened his rain coat, shaking his head. He stared at Steve long enough that Steve threw his hands in the air helplessly, realizing that he was completely outnumbered.

"What test?" Jonas asked after confirming Steve wouldn't keep making a fuss. Murray rolled his eyes, straightened his house coat like it was a business suit, then dropped heavily into the armchair beside the couch, turning to address Steve.

"First of all, I'd like to say that I wasn't actually planning to shoot anybody. Not only is it completely uncivilized to blow some kid's brains out in another kid's living room, but I don't trust the prison system here whatsoever. And make no mistake; I'd go to prison. You were all involved in that fiasco last year so there's no doubt in my mind that your houses are tapped so hard they can hear the shitty music you play through your headphones on your walkman."

"Well, thanks, now I'm *completely* reassured," Steve muttered sardonically as he dropped onto the couch beside Jonas.

"Second, the test is..." Murray's eyes flicked from Steve to Jonas, narrowing. "To see if you were a Nazi super-soldier. I'm still not convinced Hitler died, and it's very strange that a German boy would turn up here after everything that happened. However, you'd have to be highly trained if they sent you and I didn't give you enough time to measure how I was holding the gun, which the lack of bullets would change the weight of and make me hold just slightly differently. So since you'd assume it was loaded, if you really *were* a super-soldier, you would've been able to knock that gun away before I pulled the trigger."

"Is he for real?" Steve side-mouthed to Nancy, earning a swat to the shoulder and a shush. Jonas was shaking his head and kept looking at Nancy as if waiting for her to translate.

"He's very hard to read, this one," Murray murmured, leaning forward in the chair and squinting at Jonas's face. "It only took me a couple of seconds to see that Steve is too honest for anyone to worry about. I feel like he's a terrible liar. This one, though... I can't tell if he actually doesn't understand me or if he's just acting."

"Can you translate?" Jonas asked Nancy, but before she could respond, Murray piped up.

"No need, kiddo. I'm fluent in seven different languages, including a lost language that the Japanese used to use for coding. I was testing to see if you were a Nazi."

Steve had no idea what Murray and Jonas were saying to each other, but as their conversation continued, Murray's eyes grew wide and he leaned back in his chair, nodding and assuming a position that said he might be there for a while.

"I'll need a few bottles of vodka for this," Murray told the room in general, eyes never leaving Jonas. "Nancy and Jonathan, you'll go back to the place I was staying and get them. I want the Absolut on the second shelf, and this time we aren't diluting it. Steve, you're going to check every obvious and subtle surface in this room for bugs. Jonas, you're going to tell me your whole story. Leave nothing out."

He repeated the last bit in German and everyone shared glances before deciding they may as well do as he said. Steve heaved himself off the couch to start a search he knew for a fact would be fruitless, but did nonetheless because if he didn't satisfy Murray's demands, he might never know Jonas's story. It seemed to go on for hours, Jonas's voice muted and subdued while the clock ticked away.

"You can check for bugs in the other rooms too." Murray's voice was absentminded and distracted as Steve finished the room they were in. He drew a deep breath in through his nose, wanting to protest, but went to do as he was told anyway.

A sudden nervousness in Jonas's tone made him pause, turning back when Murray called him over.

"Never mind," Murray sighed, gesturing for Steve to sit. "Apparently he doesn't trust me enough to want to be in the room alone with me. He only trusts you."

"Well - that's - that's fine." Steve had been about to make a sarcastic comment about Jonas not trusting Murray, but the second part had

surprised him. He couldn't ignore the pride it gave him as he sat there and tried to be patient, barely understanding a single word out of Jonas's mouth. At one part Jonas had to close his eyes, his mouth tightening into a pained grimace as he spoke barely above a whisper, and Steve reached up to give his shoulder a comforting squeeze, wishing he'd taken German so he could know what the hell some of the words meant.

By the time Jonas was finished, Nancy and Jonathan had arrived and were sitting on the floor patiently, their fingers intertwined as Nancy listened closely. At least all of this was taking Steve's mind off of their relationship; the pain was less now than it had been for the past few months.

"Well, shit." Murray grabbed the vodka Nancy had handed him and unscrewed it, staring at the label for a while.

"Do you want me to get some glasses?" Jonathan asked, half-rising to his feet.

"This is more than a 'glass' problem." Murray unscrewed the cap, looked at Jonas, looked at the alcohol, then handed it over to Jonas first. *"Drink up. You don't just deserve it; you need it."* He helped himself to a bottle next, uncapping it and taking a long, drawn-out swig, grimacing when he was done. Jonas took a few tentative sips from his bottle, staring forlornly at his hands.

"So is he actually from the future?" Steve couldn't wait a second longer as Murray got up, walked the room, and sat down again. He let out a half-groan, half-whine that wasn't really affirming of anything and took another long drink before answering, slamming the bottle down on the table.

"Undoubtedly. He's from the future - and what's more, despite the time travel, the future is alright. What *isn't* alright is his existence. Everything about him is a paradox."

"Meaning?" Nancy prompted when Murray fell silent, watching Jonas watch nothing.

"Let's see. Where do I begin? Oh, I know; he just found out that his

father is his friend's younger brother. Yeah, we'll start there. His father, Michael, is Mikkel, who's about six years younger than him. Mikkel is missing, and Michael killed himself. They're the same person. Who else have we got? Ulrich, who's having an affair with his mother, is Mikkel's dad. His grandfather. Making one of his friends his uncle, and the girl he made out with his aunt. We've also got a guy who's most definitely his future self doing some weird shit which I have to think about. And dead kids! We love throwing dead kids into the mix, because why not? Why shouldn't kids who go missing in our time show up a couple of days dead in 2019?"

"His friend's missing brother is his father?" Jonathan asked in shock.

"His mom is having an affair with her husband's father?" Nancy questioned, face slightly revolted.

"Woah, woah, woah. He made out with his *aunt*?" Steve asked, side-eyeing Jonas.

"Yes, yes, and yes," Murray answered as Jonas's shoulders drew up like he was trying to protect himself from the questions. "Here's the gist of it; he tried to bring his father - who's a kid right now and who somehow ended up in 1986 - back to 2019, because that's where he's missing from. Doing so should effectively erase his existence because that means his father won't meet his mother. Instead, however, he came through the Upside Down and met Eleven. Now that can mean one of two things, depending on your point of view.

"One, if you're a stickler for the rules of time, is that someone brought his father back to the past. Two is a little more tricky. According to space-time theories, space and time are connected as one instead of two separate things. That means that instead of being linear, time is circle you can loop back to through different dimensions. By nearly erasing his own existence, he was shoved into a different space-time dimension where he could exist because something can't become nothing. He can't exist in our space-time because he was never born, but he can't just not exist anymore. Hence, he ended up in the Upside Down."

"If he's not supposed to exist in our time, how is he sitting on my couch?"

Murray drank some more, his expression looking more and more like he'd just swallowed a lemon.

"I don't know," he finally admitted, searching Jonas's face for something. "But I hope it isn't what I suspect. I need to do some research. I'll meet you back here in a week. *Watch yourself, kid.*"

That said, he rose unsteadily to his feet and walked out, leaving everyone stunned. Nancy quickly got up to run after him while Jonathan and Steve exchanged glances, then stared at Jonas, watching as he started draining vodka like it was water.

"That's enough," Steve commanded when Jonas started choking a little, quickly taking the bottle away. "You're gonna kill your liver."

He was still trying to process everything Murray had said, but the most prominent thing he'd heard was that Jonas had just found out. Meaning he probably hadn't known the girl he'd kissed was his aunt, and that he'd recently found out that some of the people in his life were relatives. At some point, his father had killed himself as well. No wonder he'd been so grim when Steve had asked him about his life before.

"I'd stay to help you out with him, but I've got work and school, plus Mom wants Will's room painted before he gets back. It's a surprise for him, we're getting it done all colorful because..." Jonathan trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "I guess this might be more important. I can - "

"It's cool, man," Steve assured him, draping an arm around Jonas's shoulders. "I'll show him around and we'll spend the week relaxing until that messed up conspiracy guy figures out what to do. Besides, Will deserves something nice. How about in return, you bring the little shits over when they get back? It's what, four more days? El can come meet the guy she sent to me. Right, Jonas?"

Jonas was still in the midst of looking a little shell-shocked, but at Steve's question he snapped out of it a little, glancing between Jonathan and Steve before nodding. He clearly hadn't been paying much attention, although he looked alert enough now that Steve had brought him into the conversation.

"Right," Jonas agreed, despite not knowing what they'd been talking about.

"Okay. Then I'll go help Nance with Murray, since he can be... difficult. I really am sorry about the gun, Steve. I mean, both of you... I'm sorry. I didn't know."

It still made him slightly angry to think about, but when Jonathan was frowning at the floor like letting them down had devastated him, it was hard to act upset. Steve reached out a hand to solemnly shake Jonathan's and they said their goodbyes before Steve was once again left alone with rain coat boy. Now the silence between them felt heavier, weighed down by questions that couldn't begin to be answered even if they spoke the same language.

"Listen, I know you don't understand everything, but I think you understand enough to know the heart of the questions I ask," Steve finally stated, standing up to finish cleaning the living room.

It was probably extremely unfair that Jonas's entire story had been spilled out that afternoon while Jonas knew virtually nothing about the weird ass things that happened in Hawkins. Unfortunately, Murray didn't seem like he'd wanted to go into detail about their problems to some guy no one was sure they could trust. Steve supposed it was up to him to determine if they really could trust Jonas; he'd have to get to know Rain Coat and report to the others before they told Jonas anything about El or the Upside Down. That's what he'd take the week to do, and he should probably leave the hardest questions until they knew each other better. But he wasn't exactly a master of tact, and if he was right then he may have to keep a closer eye on Jonas than he'd originally thought.

"So I have to ask... Obviously you knew you'd stop existing if you brought your friend's - your fa - Mikk - Michae - *that kid* back to the future. After everything you've been through, I mean... Do you *want* to stop existing?"

The look Jonas gave him was so blank that at one point in his life he would've assumed the question wasn't understood. But that was before he'd taken on the role of a babysitter to a bunch of kids who hid things more expertly than politicians. Now he saw the nearly

imperceptible twitch in Jonas's eyelids as those eyes were tilted away from him.

"Tired," was all Jonas claimed as he got up, avoiding Steve's gaze. *"I think I'm going to go to bed. Sleep."*

"...Yep, sure, fine." Steve watched as he slunk towards the hall, looking like a puppy who was guilty of chewing up the couch. "I'll bring a glass up to put by the sink in case you want some water. And you really should eat more; don't think I won't keep track of that. Oh, also, we'll be getting up earlier tomorrow so just be prepared! I'm gonna show you around!"

"Okay." Jonas's voice floated from somewhere already near the top of the stairs as Steve rolled his eyes. However old he was, Jonas had the avoidance coping mechanism the kids used down to a T. Not that Steve could talk; he'd realized this morning after being momentarily speechless at Jonas in a towel that he probably needed to get laid. Because usually people coming out of his shower were girls he'd just slept with, and it had been a weird disconnect that it was a guy, and it had nothing to do with him thinking Jonas wasn't half bad looking with the dirt washed off. Which he hadn't thought, absolutely not. Because his days of sleeping with people he didn't know well were over. Which... why was he thinking about this again?

"Get it together, Harrington," he chastised himself as he tied the garbage bag, shooting one last glance at the hall Jonas had disappeared down. He would treat Jonas like one of the kids, just another person to look after despite them being around the same age. Tomorrow he'd show the guy around and try to show him a good time to wipe that perpetual tragic expression from his face. He could do that without any wayward thoughts. He was sure of it.